

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID W. LEWIS

The Forestry Crisis

Public Policy & Richard Florida's Clock of History

"The current economic transformation is as big and as challenging as the transformation from agriculture to industry. Our economy is shifting away from jobs based largely on physical skills or repetitive tasks to ones that require analytical skills and judgement. . . . The change is inexorable. We cannot turn away from it, nor can we slow it. The clock of history is always ticking."

Richard Florida, "Ontario in the Creative Age"

By Steven High

Photographs by David W. Lewis

THE PROPHETS OF THE "NEW economy" have been proclaiming the death of the industrial age for as long as I can remember. Alvin Toffler, Daniel Bell, Peter Drucker, and countless others have heralded the economic transformation underway as the dawning of a bright new age for humanity. Richard Florida, author of the best-selling book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, is only the latest to do so. Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute, and professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, Florida has turned his "new" ideas into a business, providing advice and motivational speeches to business and political leaders throughout North America. The *Financial Post* even named him a "guru" in April 2008.

Wanting some sage advice, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty commissioned Florida to undertake a study of the "changing composition of Ontario's economy and workforce" and to examine "historical changes and projected future trends" affecting the province. In the resulting February 2009 report, Florida urged the government to resist public calls to "protect the past" and not to undertake bailouts just to "preserve what we have during this time of uncertainty." Bailouts, Florida advised, "can only forestall the inevitable." To prosper in the new global economy, he says, "we must create new jobs in high-value industries and occupations, and shift our employment from routine-oriented to creativity-oriented occupations." Apparently, we must aspire to "remake Ontario" and Canada. One might well ask, however: for whom?

Florida categorizes the workforce as either "creative" or "routine." On the one hand, creative-oriented jobs are highly autonomous and require workers to think. For Florida, creative people are mainly in business, engineering, information technology, science, finance, law and the arts. On the other hand, "routine-oriented jobs" comprise everyone else: blue-collar workers, support staff, and all those in the service sector. According to Florida, these folks don't think. They merely "carry out tasks" in a prescribed order. He doesn't acknowledge the creativity that working people invest in their jobs or the skills developed over a lifetime in the office or on the shop floor. In Florida's world, only higher education seems to count.

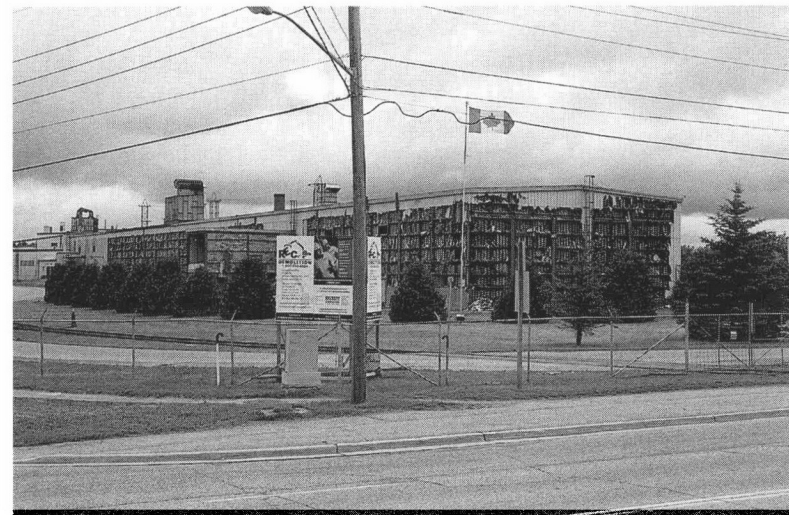
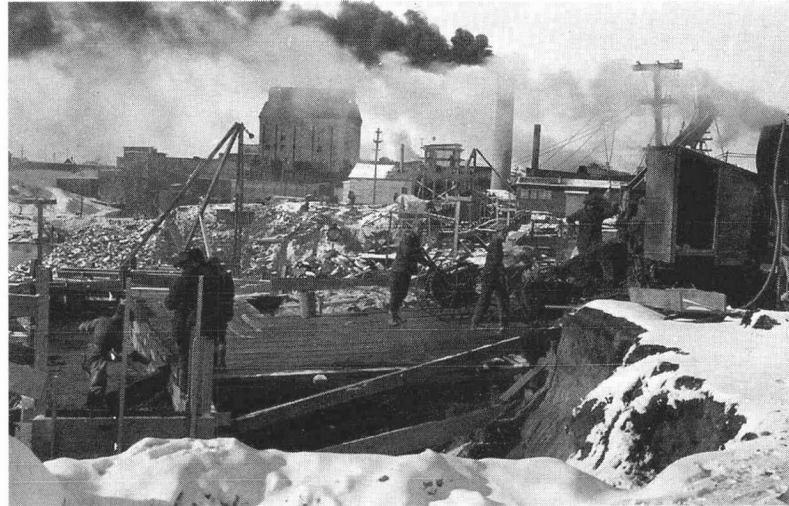
THE GEOGRAPHY OF RISE AND DECLINE

The geography of rise and decline mirrors this divided view of the world. According to Florida, the future is found in the large "post-industrial" cities like New York, Boston and Toronto and wherever high-tech industries take root, such as Kitchener-Waterloo, in Ontario. Older industrial cities like Hamilton and Windsor, Ontario, must radically re-tool if they are to survive in the creative age. As for Northern Ontario (my home region), well, our only chance is a vague "connectivity" with Toronto.

Page 26: The inside of the Weyerhaeuser Mill in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, before its demolition.

Page 27: Mills and factories are highly meaningful places for those who toil there. This is particularly true of workers who have spent many years in one workplace. Top photograph: Spanish River, circa 1920s (photographer unknown).

Weyerhaeuser (bottom) closed its corrugated paper mill in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, in 2002.



At its core, Florida's argument blames rural areas, industrial towns, and resource-dependent regions for their own decline. For example, he measures a place's chance of success in the "creative age" using the "3 Ts" of talent, tolerance and technology. How many university grads are there? How many tech jobs? And, most famously, he asks who is most open to "outsiders, newcomers, immigrants, minorities, and gays and lesbians." This is an interesting idea. Florida, however, uses demographic measures to determine the degree of tolerance. The absence of recent immigrants in Bathurst, New Brunswick, therefore, using Florida's logic, becomes an indication of its intolerance rather than a reflection of economic realities or other factors. In effect, the "creative class" living in

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID W. LEWIS

big cities represents the economic and cultural future, whereas the industrial and regional working class living elsewhere represents a vanishing past. People who once stood at the centre of things have been pushed aside and denigrated.

Of course, Richard Florida is not alone in his moral righteousness. It even exists within the towns and cities undergoing economic decline. When anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley, for example, interviewed teachers in the former auto-manufacturing town of Kenosha, Wisconsin, they told her that maybe *now* their working-class students will know the value of an education. For these people, the world had turned itself right-side-up once the plant closed: unionized workers were under-educated, so they never deserved the high wages, suburban homes, and new vehicles that signalled their arrival in the middle class. So, they got what they deserved. Working in a mill or in the woods to provide a middle-class life is no longer viewed as legitimate. What our political and economic leaders consider "core" and "periphery," therefore, matters. To be on the economic or cultural periphery, these days, is to be expendable.

So where does this leave forest-dependent communities in Canada? While I question Florida's suggestion that de-industrialization is inevitable (everything we see around us is made somewhere), or desirable, there is no question that this perception has served to de-politicize mill closures and job loss in the forest industry.

In 1994, 72,000 Canadians worked in paper mills

and there were more than 100 single-industry towns. Since then, the forestry crisis has devastated many such towns from coast to coast. A May 2007 Conference Board of Canada report indicated that 76 mills had closed since 2003, and capacity had been cut at another 48. An estimated 40,000 forestry jobs have been lost nationwide between 2000 and 2007. And of course, many more mills have closed since then. In my hometown of Thunder Bay, Ontario, the giant AbitibiBowater mill — the last of the city's four paper mills still running — lost half of its workforce in August 2009, and the future of the mill is said to be grim.

Workers who once stood at the centre of things have been pushed aside

POLITICAL ISOLATION

Across Canada, forestry workers and their unions have spoken of national identity in the hopes of forcing companies to rethink mill closings and to induce government intervention. The old opposition between "American bosses" and "Canadian workers," how-

ever, has not brought national attention to these local struggles. The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) has done what it can to respond to the forestry crisis: mobilizing political support (primarily within the NDP and Bloc), holding protest rallies and vigils, even using You-Tube to get out its message. But to little or no avail. The crisis has been cast in local newspapers and in the business press as a matter of global over-capacity (or a high dollar) and, so, presented as if nothing can be done here in Canada.

Government inaction on the forestry crisis is a stark reminder of how politically isolated forest-

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dependent communities have become. The social distance separating forestry workers and their communities from the "creative class" of the big cities is staggering. Word of new mill closings gets little more than a shrug in much of the rest of Canada, if it's heard of at all. This is in sharp contrast to trillion dollar bailouts of the (U.S.) financial sector.

The bailout of Chrysler and General Motors, albeit successful, faced considerable public opposition, and auto workers were required to give up deep concessions to save their jobs. Indeed, the days when Ontarians viewed the auto industry as the economic engine of the province are clearly numbered. Incredibly, no comparable demands for concessions were made of highly paid bond traders and bankers in the United States. This speaks volumes about how certain jobs are valued and others are not.

Just as Aboriginal people (supposedly caught on the wrong side of history) were cast as the "vanishing race" of the 19th century, industrial workers are now presumed to have been left behind by Richard Florida's "ticking clock" of history. But, as any historian will tell you, there is no history clock out there ticking away. Our common future is not predetermined or inevitable.

Local debates over de-industrialization, like national ones, are fundamentally about who is going to control the future. In their study of the former steel town of Youngstown, Ohio, Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, note that: "Memory is important because it helps to shape both personal and communal identity, and how individuals and communities see themselves influences their behaviour and their sense of what is possible." How Youngstown remembers its past "plays a central role in how it envisions the future." The same can and should be said about blue-collar communities in crisis here in Canada — like Sturgeon Falls, Ontario.

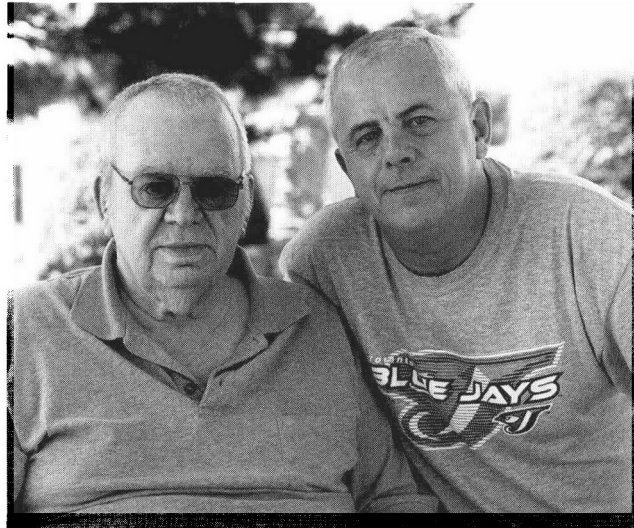
THE CASE OF STURGEON FALLS

Until recently, I have interviewed displaced workers decades after their mill or factory closed. Some of these men and women found new jobs. Others never found steady work again. Despite the time that had passed, these interviews were highly emotional undertakings. Anger and loss punctuated

many of the stories told. Yet nothing prepared me for the raw emotions encountered in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario after Weyerhaeuser closed its corrugated paper mill in 2002. We began interviewing displaced workers within a year of the closure. Oral history interviewing continued as efforts to re-open the century-old mill petered out and it was pulverized into dust and equipment was trucked away.

Former paper workers spoke with real pride of

their former lives in the mill. Almost all listed other family members, past and present, who worked at the site. Some families had three or four brothers working in the plant at the same time. Many interviewees could name three generations of mill workers in their family. Bruce Colquhoun's father and grandfather, for example, worked in the mill before him. Family memories of the mill often went back generations. Repeatedly, they insisted that this



Ken (left) and Bruce Colquhoun represent several generations of workers who worked at the Weyerhaeuser mill in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, before it closed.

was *their* mill and not Weyerhaeuser's. After all, the mill had been part of the Sturgeon Falls community for 104 years; Weyerhaeuser only owned the mill for three of these years.

Randy Restoule spoke for many when he said: "I felt a deep loss. The fact that everyone else was leaving. . . . All your friends are gone. And like I said before, the reason that you keep going in a job is because of friends." As you can imagine, the mill's demolition unleashed strong emotions. Bruce Colquhoun related this story: "When I stopped by on Ottawa Street on the far side of the mill and took some pictures, I met with some of the older guys there who are retired. One guy, who was sitting in his car, looked up at me. I went over and talked to him and he says: 'You know, Bruce, I never thought I'd live to see the day that they'd tear that mill down.' Then, tears are coming down. He says: 'I gotta go.' He took off. I never thought I'd see that place taken down either."

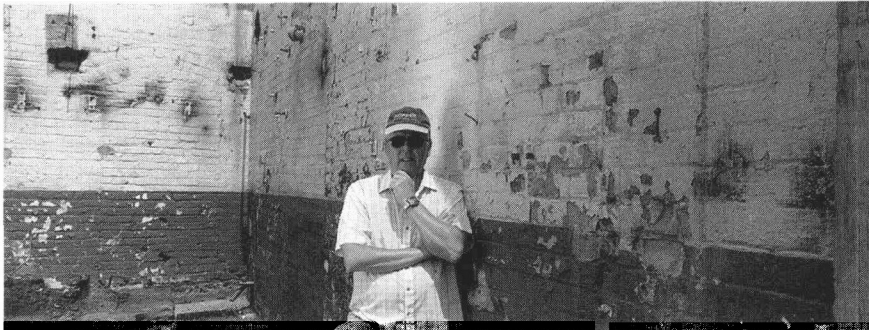
Mill closings challenge displaced workers' sense of place at the deepest level. According to Kathryn Marie Dudley: "workers lose a social structure in which they have felt valued and validated by their fellows." Within two months of the mill's closure, the town's economic development committee was re-branding Sturgeon Falls as a post-industrial tourist playground and commuter town.

Sturgeon Falls' identity crisis was not helped

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID W. LEWIS

when Weyerhaeuser shredded reams of mill records and shipped the remainder out West or to the United States. The company destroyed most of the mill records that were once housed in the building located at the foot of the old water tower. Hubert Gervais told us that: "they threw out an awful lot when they closed the mill. I just couldn't believe it. . . . Boxes and boxes of our history. Why didn't they leave it here?" I shared Hubert's outrage. When I toured the inside of the mill while it was being prepared for demolition, I saw piles of blueprints in the engineering office, some dating back to the

It is important that we ground our public policy discussion in our everyday lives



Not taking "no" for an answer, Hubert Gervais persevered and managed to save some of the paper mill's history.

Spanish River days in the early twentieth century, that were slated for shredding. I appealed to the company to consider donating these historical documents to an archive (even offering to sort them myself), but to no avail. A century of production records have effectively ceased to exist. There should be a law requiring companies to preserve mill records in cases like this.

The company, however, did not succeed in destroying everything. We discovered that many former mill workers had secreted away documents in their basements: a file here or a box there. Whenever possible, I copied the material and urged them to donate the originals to the local museum.

The stories attached to these acts of recovery were often told with a smile. For example, through the perseverance of Hubert Gervais, and the clandestine help of another staff member, a box filled with the mill's newsletter was spirited out of the closing plant. It had to be done quietly as the mill manager had already turned down Hubert's request for the materials. One day when the mill manager was out of town, Hubert was told to drive his vehicle

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID W. LEWIS

MORE THAN A PAYCHEQUE

What happens when you take the mill out of a milltown?

It should come as no surprise that mills and factories are highly meaningful places for those who toil there. This is particularly true of workers who have spent 20, 25 or even 30 years in a given workplace. As an oral historian, I cannot think of a single industrial worker whom I have interviewed in the past decade who has not spoken of their attachment to the people, the workplace, and the product. Their meaning is clear: the job meant more than a paycheck.

In their now classic study of a New England textile mill (*Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City*), published 30 years ago, Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach wrote that textile workers exhibited a "highly developed sense of place" and formed tightly knit groups. Place attachment is a complex phenomenon that involves feeling and memory. Places are seen, heard, smelled, felt, and otherwise experienced and imagined.

My own thinking on place identity and attachment has been profoundly influenced by British geographer

Doreen Massey. In her brilliant essay "Places and their Pasts," which appeared in *History Workshop Journal* in 1994, Massey argued that place identity is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together.

Places don't just exist on a map but in time as well.

According to Massey: "places as depicted on maps are places caught in a moment; they are slices through time." The identity of any place is thus temporary, uncertain and in process.

For Massey, the local is always a product of the global, at least in part. Larger social, economic and political forces are thus integral to the making of places. Yet the past of a place is contested. The claims and counter-claims about the present character of a place depend in almost all cases on particular, rival interpretations of its past. Places are thus products of history and exist in time and space.

What is largely missing from the discussion of place-making, however, is its flip-side: the unmaking or demolition of place. What happens when places are lost to us and these ties are forcibly broken? If place attachment is a symbolic bond between people and place, this bond is often severed in times of sudden social or economic crisis, such as a mill closing. People then attempt to re-create these attachments by remembering and talking about these places or by re-imagining it as something other. — S. H.

The stories people tell matter. They matter for what they reveal about lived experience and for what they tell us about memory and meaning.



Henri Labelle (left) worked at the Sturgeon Falls Mill.

up to the door, where the contraband was delivered. The same was true of other materials recovered.

This defiance is also exhibited in the story of the "Mill History Binder" — the largest binder I have ever seen. From my research project's beginning in 2003, I had been told about this magnificent binder. I really *had* to see it. To that end, I arranged to meet with Bruce Colquhoun, one of two worker historians who were the keepers of the mill's history. There were three or four others in the Action Centre (the job placement centre operated by the union) when I was introduced to Bruce and his huge black binder, one cold day in December 2003. It was like a giant memory book, with clippings of old news stories, production milestones, photographs of hunting and fishing trips, retirement parties, and so on. It comprised several hundred pages lovingly placed into plastic sleeves. In the aftermath of the mill's closure, Bruce and the others treated the mill history binder as a sacred text: their voices lowered to a whisper.

Over the next two hours, Bruce told me stories as he slowly turned the pages. A soft-spoken man, Bruce noted that the mill history binder was treasured by the mill workers and their families. He related how he would sometimes get requests to borrow the binder to show a visiting family member or a grandchild. Sometimes former mill workers just wanted to re-visit their old lives inside the mill. As far as I can tell, the mill history binder acted as a rear-view mirror for mill workers and their families at this difficult moment.

These galleries of work and friendship provided the men with a sense of pride in their work and in their shared history. The mill's production records were their collective achievements, as were the photographs of smiling retirees and service award recipients. There is none of the anger or loss that was so apparent in the interviews. Yet it is not a joyful history, as each page served as a reminder of what had been lost. In my view, the mill history binder can be read as a deep expression of place

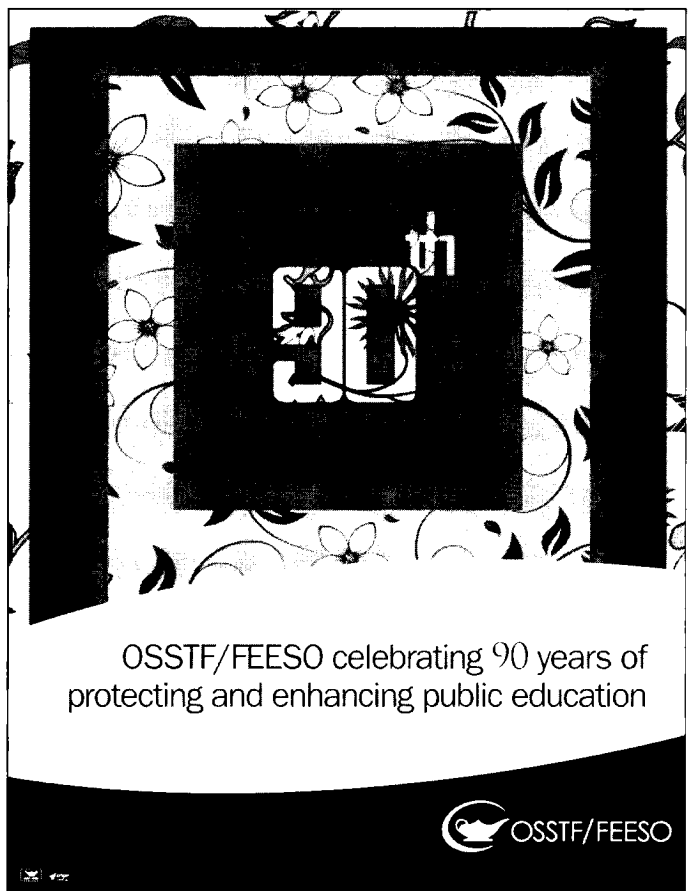
PHOTO MONTAGE: DAVID W. LEWIS

attachment. How displaced workers related to this memory book in the months and years following the closure says a great deal about the hold that the mill had on them. Without question the two worker-historians felt empowered by the existence of the binder. Their special status within the mill community was widely acknowledged. People constantly advised us to "ask Hubert" or "go see Bruce" when we asked questions about the history of the mill. "Have you seen the binder?" they'd ask.

Even in a blue-collar town like Sturgeon Falls, however, for the white-collar middle class the mill's closing was something of a "status degradation" ritual, or a morality play. Anthropologist Kathleen Newman has suggested that the doctrine of "meritocratic individualism" has taken hold in North America. It holds that those with merit rise above the rest. As a result, success is not a matter of luck, good contacts or inheritance, but simply a measure of one's moral worth. Failure is therefore explained away as a character flaw: you didn't try hard enough, you were not smart enough, you did not take risks, adapt to the situation. Certainly, this thinking has been at the core of worker retraining programs in North America.

THE ACT OF RECONNECTION

To conclude, what is happening in Sturgeon Falls is happening in towns and cities across North America. Sadly, resource towns have been *terra incog-*



nita for scholars of globalization and deindustrialization. Historically, the meaning of economic change in the core and on the periphery has been understood differently. On the one hand, industrial decline in the core has been governed by the life-course analogy: mills and factories grow old and die of natural causes. On the other hand, our understanding of economic change on the resource periphery has, until recently, been dominated by our sense of an economic cycle of extremes. The boom and bust metaphor has thus been used to explain *hard times in good times*. While both of these explanatory frameworks emphasize loss of local control and the inevitability of hard times, the prolonged crisis in forestry in recent years has insured that forestry would be lumped in with other "old economy" industries supposedly in structural decline. We see this tendency most clearly in the writings of Richard Florida, who has had a tremendous influence over public policy in recent years.

Too often, mill and factory closures like the one in Dalhousie, New Brunswick, are understood in the abstract. A distant and impersonal vantage point is standard fare, both in our daily newspapers and in our universities. With distance comes objectivity, or so we are led to believe. I obviously question this assumption. It is important that we ground our public policy discussion in our everyday lives and in our communities.

Speaking as a public historian, I would argue that the cultural work we are doing is more important now than ever; that our understanding of the past matters. Each of us has a story of origin that tells us

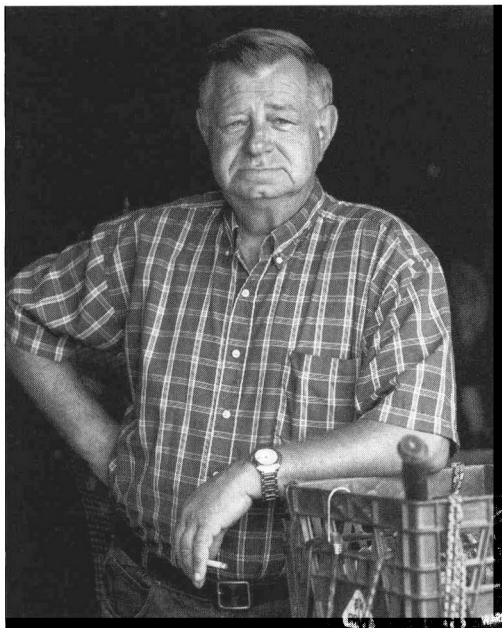
who we are and why we are here. Places have stories, too, as does every conceivable community of identification. These foundational myths of the self provide us with a sense of continuity in times of change, anchoring us to our pasts and to each other. But whose memory is to be preserved?

It is precisely for this reason that it is crucial that we put working people back at the centre of our understanding of ourselves as a people. This act of reconnection is incredibly important, since what is deemed to be "core" is not so easily thrown away or written off by those with economic and political power. There is therefore a great deal at stake. British geographer Doreen Massey once wrote that the "identity of places is very much bound up with the histories which are told of them; how these histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant." When labour history informs public policy at the local,

provincial or national levels, we complicate the work of futurist consultants like Richard Florida, who issue sweeping generalizations with little or no regard for people, place, or past.

Steven High is Canada Research Chair in Public History at Concordia University. This article is a revised version of his keynote address to the "Informing Public Policy" conference organized by the New Brunswick Labour History Project in September 2009. Send your feedback to the author at shigh@alcor.concordia.ca or to editor@ourtimes.ca.

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Former paper workers, including Claude Lortie, speak with real pride of their former lives in the mill.

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